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MAIN PROGRAMME RECORD

REGIONAL BUREAU FOR ARAB STATES

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS) manages United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) programmes and country offices in a diverse group of 18 Arab States that are geographically situated in the Middle East and Africa, with a total population of approximately 230 million. In the 1990s, the region's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) has stagnated and the income level for large parts of the population has fallen. Most often, this has been explained by high rates of population growth, dependence on oil production, which represents 75 per cent of the region's exports, and continuing dependence on public sector employment. Other factors include low levels of savings and investment and the adverse effects of war, internal strife and unresolved issues in conflict areas. Unemployment is high in most of the region, especially for youth and in urban areas. Approximately 2 million refugees and internally displaced persons suffer a life of insecurity, uprooted from their homes, lands and ways of life.

2. Viewed in a longer time-frame, the past 30 years brought dramatic, region-wide improvements in the quality of life. Life expectancy, literacy, school enrolment, access to health care and availability of safe water and sanitation have doubled or tripled in the region, and in the Gulf countries these indicators are far above the region's average.

3. Despite these improvements, however, the Arab States still face a number of challenges. Adult literacy throughout the region remains at 54 per cent, gender disparity is widespread and some 30 per cent of the population is still impoverished. The most scarce resources remain water and arable land. Resources available for development are static, if not decreasing. Some countries' development efforts are hampered even further by isolation from the international community.

4. RBAS is tackling these issues, not through scattered individual activities, but on the basis of a programme that addresses the major challenges facing the region as a whole. Keeping cultural diversity and regional sensitivities in mind, all country programmes in RBAS focus on the following essential areas of poverty eradication and the deterioration of social safety nets: (a) building on the noted successes in the area of governance to decrease further gender disparities and promote participatory development; (b) engaging civil society, helping improve the environment in which it operates and promoting its integration; (c) assisting the region in moving meaningfully to market economies by addressing issues of access and competition; (d) stressing the building of human capital as a primary objective; (e) improving databases without which baselines and development plans cannot meaningfully be established and implemented; and (f) producing national human development reports, making them a central element of all national debates and plans.

5. Many of the changes taking place in the Arab States need to be continued and strengthened, in order to allow these countries to achieve higher levels of sustainable human development (SHD) in the next 5 to 10 years. This includes pursuit of successful economic growth strategies based on structural adjustment

and employment generation and the development of a labour force for the cyber-economy of the future.

6. SHD is considered a serious goal by all countries in the region and has already been translated into several initiatives focusing on poverty. Somalia and the Sudan stand out as countries that have put policy into practice, stressing poverty eradication through the highly successful area development schemes programme, which is being replicated in other countries in the region.

7. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the work of UNDP in the areas of SHD and poverty eradication received a major boost during the regional experts meeting on poverty alleviation and sustainable livelihood in the Arab world. In August 1996, a national SHD workshop was held, bringing together a large number of government officials and civil society organizations. It resulted in recommendations that will be pursued as part of the UNDP programme on operationalizing SHD. Following the meeting, UNDP held a number of consultations with the Government which addressed the need to prepare a national strategy for the eradication of poverty.

8. The experts meeting mentioned above also represents the single most important initiative at the bureau level in terms of promoting national ownership of programme priority setting and dialogue with Governments and civil society. The meeting in Damascus was attended by 63 participants - representatives of 14 Arab Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national academic institutions and international organizations, including the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Arab Monetary Fund, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the World Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Department for Development Support and Management Services (DDSMS) and UNDP. The purpose of the meeting was to support a region-wide dialogue on ways to eradicate poverty and begin to work towards the preparation of a comprehensive poverty eradication strategy for the Arab region. Participants in the various working groups discussed the root causes of poverty and set priority targets for future activities and key policies suitable for the region. The meeting proved that it is possible to debate openly, among representatives of the public sector and civil society, the difficult subject of poverty. It proved also that a common understanding can be achieved.

9. RBAS is currently consolidating the recommendations of that experts meeting into a comprehensive strategy for poverty alleviation for the Arab States region, which will be completed by mid-1997. This strategy will provide an analytical overview of the socio-economic situation of the region. It will review social and economic instruments for the alleviation of poverty and put forward recommendations for priority areas of interventions for policy makers and development practitioners. Concurrently, and in order to bring analysis and concept into operation, RBAS is establishing a $5 million regional programme for poverty alleviation and sustainable livelihoods to support national and regional activities in the Arab States, beginning in early 1997.

10. The strategy for poverty alleviation is seen by RBAS as a significant contribution to the Arab-specific debate on the issue of poverty, as well as an

outline for real-life applications. RBAS intends to encourage UNDP resident representatives to organize national workshops to debate the strategy in the national context, to create a portfolio of priority projects for national and external donor financing. UNDP is negotiating with partners in the region to establish a UNDP Arab fund for poverty eradication. The strategy will become the substantive framework for the operations of this fund.

II. OPERATIONALIZING SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND STRENGTHENING COUNTRY OFFICES AND HEADQUARTERS

A. Poverty eradication and the creation of jobs and sustainable livelihoods

11. RBAS established the strategic goals that were incorporated into the country and regional programming for 1996-1997 through a series of interactive meetings of headquarters and field office staff. These included the meeting of resident representatives in Djibouti in March, the cluster meeting of resident representatives in the Arab Mediterranean countries in Tunis, Tunisia, in May, and the meeting of deputy resident representatives in New York in June 1996.

12. The year 1996 was one of reorientation towards poverty eradication for every country office in RBAS. In Yemen, almost 100 small projects covering a wide variety of development needs were gradually phased out and replaced by SHD programming. UNDP initiated dialogue with government, civil society, donors and United Nations agencies in the areas of sustainable water resources management; sustainable environment management; poverty eradication and employment generation; decentralization and governance; and rehabilitation and reconstruction.

13. Somalia, still a conflict-ridden country with no nationally recognized government since 1991, shifted the focus of its operations towards rehabilitation and poverty eradication through the Somalia Rural Rehabilitation Programme. Additionally, by repairing ports and airports in the relatively stable regions of the northeast and northwest, UNDP has managed to stimulate local economies at the regional level and provide employment opportunities.

14. In Lebanon, the focus on SHD by the UNDP office has spread to almost all programming activities. UNDP support for integrated rural development in the impoverished region of Baalbeck-Hermel was critical in helping the government develop a regional strategy for the area.

15. Jordan's small indicative planning figure (IPF) resources were fully committed early in the cycle, leaving very little for programming within the new mandate of UNDP. During 1996, however, through support from Special Programme Resources (SPR) and regional funds, a number of preparatory initiatives were launched which will provide the basis for the next cycle's programming focusing on poverty reduction. Particular emphasis will be placed on employment, environmental protection, sustainable resources management and strategies for strengthening Jordan's international competitiveness.

B. Advancement of women

16. In May 1996, in collaboration with the UNDP Human Development Report Office, the Government of Tunisia and the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research, RBAS organized a regional symposium entitled Gender and Human Development in the Arab Region. The symposium benefited from the participation of over 100 representatives from Arab Governments, NGOs, and regional and United Nations organizations. It addressed three basic themes: women in the economy, women and decision-making and measurement of gender equality. The symposium concluded with the adoption of the Declaration of Tunis on Gender and Human Development, which focused on policy options for increasing women's economic and political participation in the Arab region.

17. At the national level, country offices continued to work through United Nations inter-agency task forces to support national committees established for follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China. In Egypt, for example, UNDP, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF jointly supported the preparation of a conceptual framework which identifies the strategic entry points of interventions to implement the recommendations of the United Nations conferences. Based on this study, UNDP has been working on developing a plan of action that will form the basis for the elaboration of a comprehensive programme for empowering Egyptian women to participate in the decision-making processes of the country. Several other UNDP offices, including those in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, have continued their collaboration with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in supporting projects which are aimed at empowering women to enhance their participation in the economy.

C. Protection and regeneration of the environment

18. The Mediterranean Environmental Technical Assistance Programme (METAP) helps the countries in the region bordering the Mediterranean Sea in pollution prevention and integrated water management. Following a very intensive participatory process with the Mediterranean countries in 1995, the METAP Regional Capacity-Building Programme was approved and the overall METAP programme was launched in Cairo, Egypt, in October 1996. All METAP activities will be supported by the regional facility based in Cairo with outposted staff from UNDP, the World Bank and the Export-Import Bank of the United States. The METAP Regional Capacity-Building Programme has mobilized $1.45 million from the World Bank in cost-sharing for 1996 with anticipation of similar amounts per year for the following four years. A major resource drive with the donor community has resulted in the acceptance of METAP as an important financing mechanism in the region; bilateral donors are currently identifying subprojects from the portfolio for direct funding. Furthermore, bilateral donors are finalizing arrangements for secondment of staff to the METAP regional facility and for project work as consultants.

D. Governance

19. Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon and Morocco are currently implementing major RBAS programmes in the area of governance. Twenty-five per cent of UNDP activities in this sector in the Arab region are projects designed and executed to assist aid management and coordination; 21 per cent focus on planning and support for policy formulation; while the remainder are divided among support to public sector reform, strengthening civil society and financial management projects.

20. An evaluation, "Public Sector Management and Reform in the Arab Region", was conducted by the Office of Evaluation and Strategic Planning (OESP) during 1996. It assessed the adequacy, efficiency and quality of UNDP involvement in the reform of the public sector and its management in the Arab region, taking public sector management and reform as a starting point leading to good governance.

21. The general conclusion drawn from the review of RBAS activities in Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen is that the governance-focused projects have had or are likely to have a major, positive impact, the degree of which varies among countries. In countries where the demand is articulated clearly by the Government or where UNDP has been instrumental in articulating such demands, the policy dialogue has been fruitful and the impact is much more constructive. Kuwait and Tunisia and, to a certain extent, Saudi Arabia are three examples of such countries. Another conclusion from the review is that irrespective of the quality of UNDP cooperation, the impact is commensurate with the country's desire to carry out the reform of the public sector, as articulated systematically in government strategy plans. In some instances, however, the existence of a plan does not guarantee that project results will be sustainable, since several broad-based social and economic conditions exist and there may be financial constraints.

III. NEW PROGRAMMING ARRANGEMENTS AND DELIVERY

22. RBAS has already approved four proposals under the Poverty Strategies Initiative (PSI) launched by the UNDP Administrator, as a follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), held in Copenhagen, Denmark. In addition to the PSIs formulated for Djibouti, Morocco, the Sudan and Yemen, proposals from Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and the United Arab Emirates are in the pipeline. The bureau is expecting an additional 10 country proposals in the coming 3 months.

23. In Somalia, a United Nations appeal has been launched with the characteristic features of joint UNDP/United Nations programming and implementation in the four priority areas of governance, rehabilitation, socio-economic reintegration and emergency/humanitarian assistance.

24. In Morocco, active coordination efforts and consultation with Joint Consultative Group on Policy (JCGP) partners, as well as the Government, donors and civil society, culminated in the preparation of an advisory note and country cooperation framework (CCF). The active participation of United Nations agencies in a consultative process also led to the development of a country

strategy note (CSN) and the decision to harmonize the respective programming cycles. The preparation of the advisory note has stimulated coordination among organizations of the United Nations system and led to common vision within the JCGP agencies.

IV. ADVOCACY, BUILDING CONSTITUENCIES AND MOBILIZING RESOURCES FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

25. Several countries in the Arab region have published one or more national human development reports, and it is expected that by the end of 1997 all country offices will have produced one. The preparation of these reports provided a framework for UNDP offices in advocating SHD and building constituencies. The efforts of UNDP in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon have been very visible in this area.

26. The theme of Egypt's 1996 report is poverty alleviation and its contribution will be critical for directing, in a more focused manner, the programmes of Egypt's Social Fund for Development, which will continue to receive UNDP support through a second-phase programme, for which $25 million in donor funding has been mobilized.

27. In Lebanon, the UNDP office engaged the Government and civil society in a dialogue of critical SHD issues. Such consultations have revolved around the preparation of the first national human development profile for Lebanon, during which a number of national workshops were held to examine various aspects of SHD in the Lebanese context, focusing on the need to integrate marginalized groups. In parallel, the UNDP office has succeeded in encouraging the Government to endorse the establishment of a national commission for social development, which will be supported by UNDP in developing a national strategy for poverty alleviation. Contributions by UNDP in this area will be critical for supporting the shift in the Government's programme towards placing more emphasis on the social dimension of development.

28. During 1996, preparations for Jordan's first national human development report began and a number of studies are currently under way. The report will focus on youth as a major theme, taking into account the particular problem of unemployment in Jordan. The office also initiated steps towards the elaboration of a comprehensive poverty eradication programme, focusing on monitoring and measuring; policy formulation and strategy development; public awareness and advocacy; and grass-roots pilot interventions.

29. Yemen initiated preparatory work for the formulation of a national human development report; compiled an assessment and list of all national NGOs as a first step to involving civil society in the implementation of programmes; and prepared a strategy for collaboration with these NGOs.

30. Activities were carried out in Egypt as a follow-up to the United Nations conferences, either by UNDP alone, or collectively with the United Nations system. An action-oriented paper for the advancement of women, entitled "Where to Go from Beijing", was jointly commissioned by UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF. It will be used as one of the background documents for the preparation of the

advisory note, the CCF and the CSN. Similar papers are being prepared on job creation and sustainable livelihoods, as a WSSD follow-up, and on the environment, as a follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). UNFPA has also been supporting population issues highlighted at the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, Egypt.

31. In the Maghreb countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), high priority is being attached to the follow-up to the United Nations conferences, and political decisions are being implemented to curb poverty and provide opportunities for job creation, sound management of the environment, integration of population parameters into national development policy and promotion of food security. Symposiums on gender mainstreaming and empowerment took place at the subregional and regional levels and have laid the groundwork for good governance and sustainable development and livelihoods.

32. In Lebanon, United Nations agencies have initiated three inter-agency working groups for collaborative action on issues arising from recent United Nations conferences: basic social services; employment and environment; and sustainable development.

33. Cooperation with NGOs in some countries has been facilitated by the availability of resources from the Partners in Development Programme, the Local Initiative Facility for Urban Environment and the Global Urban Management Programme. Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon are beneficiaries of funds available from these programmes and they have established very strong NGO networks. Coverage in local media of UNDP initiatives has also been critical in advocating a central role for people in the development process. Efforts in Jordan and Lebanon are serving as examples; both countries made a special effort during 1996 to improve their relations with media representatives. Assigning specific staff members this responsibility has produced good results. In Lebanon, UNDP sponsored a week of activities commemorating United Nations Day and the launch of the International Decade for the Elimination of Poverty.

34. In Lebanon, UNDP has been successful in mobilizing resources for its programmes, including the Baalbeck-Hermel Integrated Development Programme, which will receive $4 million in cost-sharing, and the Programme for Post-Conflict Socio-Economic Rehabilitation for the South of Lebanon. UNDP support in Lebanon was also critical in helping the Government develop a resource mobilization strategy for a donor conference in Paris, France in June. In addition, a profile of a national integrated regional programme for Baalbeck was presented to the "Friends of Lebanon" donor meeting held in December to mobilize financing for Lebanon's reconstruction programme.

35. Coordination and involvement of key donors in Yemen resulted in UNDP, the Government of the Netherlands and the World Bank forming a multi-donor group and contributing $13 million to a water resources management programme. Close collaboration is also maintained with the Netherlands and the World Bank in the area of flood-damage mitigation and reconstruction and capacity-building for disaster management.

V. STRENGTHENING UNDP PARTNERSHIPS IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

36. In almost all RBAS countries the resident coordinator has convened United Nations working groups and task forces covering a wide range of matters, including security in countries with special circumstances, governance and decentralization, poverty, gender, rehabilitation and reconstruction and the environment. These special UNDP-United Nations task forces have sharpened the common vision of the United Nations family in follow-up to the recommendations of global conferences.

37. During 1996, the process of preparing Egypt's third national human development report was further strengthened through an agreement among JCGP partners to upgrade the 1996 report so that it produces the indicators required for the implementation of a common country assessment beginning in 1997, and annually thereafter.

38. Coordination is of high priority in countries with special circumstances, where security and humanitarian matters as well as rehabilitation and development have mandated a strengthened resident coordinator's role and visibility. In Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen, a solid system has been established under the resident coordinator.

VI. UNDP PERFORMANCE IN COUNTRIES IN CRISIS AND OTHER SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

39. Programming for countries in crisis necessitates working with local communities in building their capacity to move rapidly along the relief-to-development continuum.

40. In addition to regular IPF funds, five countries with special circumstances in the Arab region benefited from target for resource assignment from the core (TRAC 1.1.3) resources. For the biennium 1996-1997, $5.1 million was allocated for Djibouti, Lebanon, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen. Within this allocation, $1 million was programmed for the preparation of strategic frameworks in Somalia and Yemen. The remainder will be used in Djibouti, Lebanon, Somalia and the Sudan for post-conflict rehabilitation, assistance to internally displaced persons and area development schemes.

41. Somalia and the Sudan are currently hosting the two most successful community-based programmes in the region. In the Sudan, the area development schemes (ADS), launched in 1988, represent an innovative rural development approach designed as an alternative to the conventional "top-down" approach. A joint effort of the Government and UNDP, ADS places the community in the forefront of project activities by making villagers the key decision makers. Following the success of the ADS in northern Sudan, a paper was prepared to promote that model at the WSSD. The ADS approach has also been adapted to the needs of communities in areas that are suffering the effects of the civil war, but that are secure enough to consider rehabilitation activities. Dialogue is under way between headquarters and the country office in the Sudan to build on the ADS experience. Specifically, consideration of how the lessons learned from the 1996 impact assessment study of the ADS can be translated into guidance for

a wider UNDP audience is being examined. This study highlights, among other things, efforts aimed at the advancement of women and creation of sustainable livelihoods.

42. The $20 million Somalia Rural Rehabilitation Programme (SRRP) supports social and economic rehabilitation activities in areas of Somalia that are relatively stable and conflict free. In the absence of national structures of governance, the programme uses participatory techniques at the community level to identify, plan and implement projects spanning a wide range of rehabilitation activities. The SRRP has already funded and implemented hundreds of local initiatives which have sustainable impact in improving the access to basic social services, improving the productive potential of rural communities and establishing sustainable income-generation opportunities for rural populations. Priority is given in the allocation of SRRP funds to projects with a positive impact on the economic and social situation of women, on the creation of a conducive environment for the return of refugees and internally displaced and on the reintegration of ex-combatants into the economic and social mainstream.

43. UNDP country offices have cooperated with the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) in the preparation of appeals for Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, and the Sudan. Cooperation with DHA has been especially evident in Operation Lifeline Sudan. This humanitarian programme attracted external funding of over $30 million in 1996. A management review this year brought the Government, rebel factions, external donors and the United Nations system together to discuss the future of the programme. One significant result of the discussions was the agreement that relief and humanitarian activities should be considered together with longer-term developmental approaches to the country's problems.

44. In 1996, the country offices in Iraq and Lebanon were actively involved in the preparation of appeals and subsequent action plans for post-crisis recovery. In May, a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Iraq and the United Nations to ensure effective implementation of Security Council resolution 986 (1995) was signed. Among the projects identified as needing urgent humanitarian attention was the repair of electric power generation plants and transmission substations. UNDP, in coordination with DDSMS, will be responsible for the implementation of the provisions for the electricity sector. The Memorandum of Understanding set out two distinct roles for UNDP and DDSMS. One role, for the whole of Iraq, is to observe the delivery and distribution of the equipment and spare parts to their final destination in an equitable manner. The second role is to procure, deliver and install the equipment and spare parts for the northern region.

45. The post-conflict socio-economic rehabilitation programme of southern Lebanon will build on the experience of both the Baalbeck-Hermel regional development programme and the socio-economic rehabilitation of the displaced project. It will involve consultations with civil society, the delivery of assistance through NGOs and the management of credit schemes.

VII. BUILDING A LEANER, MORE ACCOUNTABLE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

46. RBAS manages its offices and programmes with the assistance of 100 international and national professional staff members. Of these, 9 out of 10 are stationed in the field, and 4 out of 5 international staff work in country offices. These levels of staffing and ratios were established in the current 1996-1997 budget strategy, which abolished 11 international professional posts in RBAS.

47. With leaner staffing, the bureau has stressed the need to raise the qualifications of its professionals. This has made training one of the high priorities in 1996. In view of scarce training funds, regional and subregional meetings were used to familiarize staff with new ideas and skills. Some 60 professional staff members at the resident representative, deputy resident representative and national officer level were trained in communication skills, resource mobilization and programme development for environment protection. A meeting of deputy resident representatives culminated in the preparation of draft country resource mobilization plans. Several country offices conducted workshops based on the SHD Learning Package.

48. Attention was focused on review and formal evaluation of programmes and projects at the country and regional level. In addition to the evaluations undertaken in the country projects, the bureau carried out a thematic evaluation of all country governance projects as well as a comprehensive evaluation of its regional agricultural projects. It also developed a set of criteria for identifying programme and project elements that are indispensable for sustainability of the regional initiatives. On that basis, a sample of regional projects was reviewed and important conclusions were incorporated into the new RBAS regional programme.

49. Among the key recommendations incorporated as a result of the evaluation were: networking among existing regional institutions rather than building new ones; forming steering committees comprising focal points to manage projects; and revitalizing the use of intergovernmental meetings as the best mechanism for approving important regional initiatives.

50. Another important initiative was the RBAS Quarterly Brief. While initially envisaged as a tool for the drafting of the Administrator's report, the brief has become a publication that enhances the dialogue among country offices and ensures a continuous exchange between those offices and headquarters.